

## Special Feature: Did You Know...about the Manila Galleons?

By Clem Dougherty

[This is the second in a two-part piece about the Manila galleons and their journey east to North America and California. For a brief refresher... Clem described that from 1572 to 1769, the only regular contact the Spanish had with California was by ships traveling down the California coast once a year between Manila (under Spanish rule) in the Philippines and Acapulco in Mexico. These ships were called the “**Manila Galleons.**” The galleons were sailing ships dependent on the prevailing winds to move between their destinations. Ships sailing west from Mexico to the Philippines could follow almost a direct line with “tail winds” pushing them from behind. That journey took approximately 3 months. Returning west, however, was not as easy, as the galleons had to travel from Manila north to the coast of Japan where they could use the west-to-east prevailing wind. From there they sailed across the Pacific to Cape Mendocino off the CA coast before heading south to Acapulco. This journey took twice as long as the trip from Mexico to Manila.]

*For more information from Clem’s July piece, please refer to the July **Clarion** using the new CSCMVA website:*

<http://portal.parks.ca.gov/CapitalDistrict/CapitolMuseum/CapitolMuseumVolunteers>

### Did You Know...(Part Two)

Round trip the Manila galleons sailed 18,000 miles. Ordinarily, only one ship a year sailed in each direction. Manila became a gathering point for people wanting to use the galleons from all over East Asia: China, Ceylon, Indo-China, Indonesia, Thailand, India, the Spice Islands (now the Moluccas) to name a few. The ships were extremely lucrative. From Acapulco to Manila, the ships carried mostly silver and gold coming from the mines of both Mexico and Peru and manufactured goods from Europe. Asia's demand for silver appeared to be unquenchable. From Manila to Acapulco the ships carried clove, cayenne, curry, cinnamon, black pepper, china dishes, jewels such as rubies, pearls, diamonds, emeralds, delicate porcelain, finely woven rugs, cotton cloth, ivory, and most of all, Chinese silk. Likewise, the European demand for Asian goods appeared equally unquenchable.

There was, however, a dark underside to the voyages. On more than 40 occasions the ships were either wrecked or lost at sea. In one year 1655-57, four galleons were lost, and during the next 150 years sunken ships lay all along the established routes. Disease, particularly scurvy, took a heavy toll in lives on the long journey from Manila to Acapulco. In one instance in the 1600s sailors off the coast of Mexico came upon a galleon drifting aimlessly in the sea and upon boarding the ship found everyone aboard dead. To compound the problem English pirates preyed upon the galleons. Sir Francis Drake entered the Pacific in 1578 and began capturing Spanish merchant ships loaded with Asian goods. To the English the Manila galleons became the world's greatest prize.

Even though there had been three Spanish naval expeditions sent from Mexico to chart the California coast (Cabrillo in 1542, Cermeno in 1595, and Vizcaino in 1602), Spain's regular contact with California for the 197 years prior to 1769 was marginal at best and limited to one ship a year sailing down its coast. In the early 1800s Napoleon Bonaparte placed his brother Joseph upon the Spanish throne and set off a civil war in Spain to oust the French. Spain became pre-occupied with its own internal problems and no

longer kept a tight control over its empire. At the same time independence movements began springing up in the Spanish empire including in Mexico which ultimately won its independence from Spain in 1821. Thus the Manila galleons fell victim to all this unrest and ended altogether in 1815.

(Sources: Rawls and Bean: California, An Interpretive History, 9th ed., pp. 27-28; National Geographic, Sept., 1990, pp. 39-56 Parry, J.H., The Spanish Seaborne Empire, pp. 41 & 44-45; Sale, Kirkpatrick, The Conquest of Paradise, Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy, pp. 7, 15, 16, 22, 27, 58-59, 122, 123.)